I present two reports to the Senate each year, a report on the academic progress of UHM student-athletes in the fall, and an end-of-year report in the spring. My Fall 2012 academic report is available on-line at http://www.hawaii.edu/uhmfs/minutes/2012_13/far_report_academicprogress_2012fall.pdf. My spring 2012 end-of-year report (which contains links to the reports that I have submitted in previous years) is available at http://www.hawaii.edu/uhmfs/minutes/2011_12/far_report_20120426.pdf.

Academics. Since my 2012 academic report is available elsewhere, I will summarize it only very briefly here. We monitor student-athlete academic progress using several metrics: The NCAA’s “Academic Progress Rate” (the “APR”), their “Graduation Success Rate,” the separate Department of Education Federal Graduation Rate, and the student-athletes’ GPAs. During the time that we have been tracking these numbers, we have seen a slow but steady improvement in student-athlete academic success. Their average GPA last semester was 3.04, the highest we have ever seen it, and though we don’t yet have the equivalent figure for our undergraduates generally, it is likely that the student-athletes did better than the undergraduates last term. Our student-athlete APR is also rising, though it has not yet met our goal of equaling the average of Division 1 schools nationwide; and while our student-athlete Federal Graduation Rate has risen (and last year for the first time exceeded that of our undergraduates), the more meaningful student-athlete Graduation Success Rate has fallen slightly (to 71%) and lags well behind that of our Division 1 peers (80%).

These averages, of course, are not the whole story. We take a close look at each individual student’s record to see where we lost our “points,” and as we do, we try to locate the areas in which there is a need for more work. Much of the improvement, we believe, can be attributed to better recruiting: one result of our close monitoring is that the coaches have become more conscious of the need to bring to UHM students who are comfortable with our location and both able and motivated to succeed academically. We have also done a great deal to improve our admissions process: partly as a consequence of the recent NCAA Certification (on which several faculty members participated) and partly as a result of continued monitoring by the Faculty Senate Committee on Athletics, we are comfortable that apart from the waiver of some deadlines, both the standards and the procedures for admission to UHM are the same for student-athletes as they are for other students. We will continue to maintain that as our goal.

We still have a significant number of academic casualties, however: student-athletes who can’t make the grade, or who play for us for four years and leave without graduating. In an effort to make the coaches more responsible for their students’ academic success, the NCAA imposes penalties on teams with low APRs. Those penalties have recently been
raised, and they include a prohibition from participation in post-season competition for the lowest scoring teams. The defending champion Men’s Basketball team from the University of Connecticut was excluded from the NCAA tournament this year because of its low APR. One of our own teams is currently right on the edge, and it could possibly be excluded from the post-season in 2014-15 and beyond based on how well its students do in keeping up their grades this semester and returning to school in the fall.

Governance. A lot has happened in athletics since my last report, including the aborted Stevie Wonder concert, the removal of one Athletics Director, and the installation of another.

I believe that it is still too soon to assess exactly what went wrong in the Stevie Wonder affair. Because of error, neglect, or both, the university was exposed to fraud. There was then a rush to pin blame that included many who had, or should have had, some responsibility in overseeing the arrangements; this was also the moment at which our new chancellor took office and was forced to take immediate action in a brand new setting. I have no part at all in Athletics Department business affairs, I am happy to say, and I was in Thailand when all of this took place and I could only watch from afar. But what I saw was a university that took a bad situation and did almost everything it could to make it worse. I couldn’t help comparing what happened to the way in which the data breach of a couple of years ago was handled. That situation exposed far more people to possible harm; it ended up costing the university a lot more money; and it was a matter in which it should have been a lot easier to assign responsibility since there were people whose very job it was to prevent it. But no one was forced from their office; no one was put on leave; the university stepped in to limit both the damage and the bad publicity; and it did what was necessary to repair the potential harm. Then we moved on.

The whole Stevie Wonder affair, however, took place in the context of the confused structure for the oversight of athletics that I referred to in last year’s report. There I described how the system office and some members of the Board of Regents had taken a direct role in decisions that should normally be a matter for the chancellor and the Athletics Director, resulting, for one thing, in our being represented in our different athletics conferences by different administrators, and putting the Athletics Director in the impossible position of serving two and sometimes three bosses at once. Much of the confusion in the university’s response to the discovery of the fraud was due to the mixing of lines of authority, but as the dust settled after the appointment of our new Athletics Director, we seem to have profited from the lessons that we learned. President Greenwood has acknowledged that her insistence on representing UHM at the Mountain West “constituted an overstep of authority on her part” and that it “confused the roles of the university’s president and the chancellor at Manoa with respect to athletics” (interview in Ka Leo, March 18, 2013, p. 2). The Board of Regents has also re-examined its role, and it created a Task Force on Intercollegiate Athletics, consisting of three BOR members and the former Board secretary, to examine university policy on the oversight of athletics. The Task Force took their job very seriously and solicited the advice of a large number of stakeholders, including both myself and SEC Chair Bonnyjean Manini (who also served with me on the Search Committee for the new Director of Athletics).
They produced a draft policy document that is currently being considered by the BOR. The version that I have seen contains a great deal that the faculty will strongly approve of. It states very clearly that “student-athletes are first and foremost students” and that “student-athletes shall be admitted under the same standards as applied to other students and their academic performance and progress shall be comparable to non-athletes” (which have been our operating principles for several years, but which have never been enshrined as BOR policy before). It also clearly puts responsibility for the oversight of athletics in the chancellor’s office, while requiring that the chancellor make annual reports to the Board on the athletics budget and on student-athlete academic progress. It demands accountability, but only where it also confers authority.

This is the setting in which the new Athletics Director assumes his role, and the clarification of lines of authority and accountability should do much to reduce the confusion of the last few years. But some significant challenges still remain.

The Department is not yet entirely free of interference from above. One of the immediate consequences of the Stevie Wonder affair was that the Athletics Department’s authority to make contracts was withdrawn. All Athletics business affairs must now be signed off on at both the chancellor and the system level. While it is understandable that the Department should be discouraged from arranging any more concerts, they have never had any problems with making the contracts with other schools that are necessary every time we have an intercollegiate competition. Responsibility for doing so has been taken away from those who know how to do it and been placed in the hands of people who have no experience with athletics, even when no money is involved. The result has been a great deal of extra work, unnecessary delay, and a great deal of frustration.

At the same time, the Department has not yet fully emerged from the confusion created by the period when Athletics had more than one master. Last week’s Board of Regents meeting included a discussion of a report on Athletics Department fiscal affairs by the university’s external auditor. As reported by Ferd Lewis in the Star-Advertiser (4/19/13, p. C3), “Some University of Hawaii athletics department staffers felt pressured by coaches to back off fiscal controls, an independent auditor told a Board of Regents committee Thursday. . . . ‘There is a sense that administrators within the department were not able to carry out their responsibilities effectively either for fear of their jobs or retribution against them if they spoke up,’ said Corey Kubota of Accuity LLC.” A member of the Board is quoted as finding the report “disturbing.” What is not acknowledged is the role of the Board itself and of the system office in creating the culture in which staff was afraid of carrying out their assigned responsibilities because they did not know who they would have to answer to or what the university’s priorities were. In the two years leading up to the Stevie Wonder crisis, members of the BOR took a direct role in the negotiation of certain coaches’ contracts, subverting the authority of the Athletics Director. Members of the Athletics Department staff were threatened with dismissal on the basis of coaches’ complaints without any investigation into their validity. The Interim Athletics Director is reported to have told his senior staff to “keep the coaches happy” and to have told the coaches to take their complaints directly to the administration – or higher – if they didn’t get their way. The new Athletics Director is
faced with having to restore not only proper fiscal controls but also his staff’s morale and the proper lines of authority within his department. It appears, I am happy to say, that he now has the support of the campus administration, which fully understands the need to let him do his job if they are going to hold him accountable for it.

The budget. On a larger matter, the new Athletics Director will need the support not only of the chancellor but of the faculty, the system office, and the Board as well. The Athletics Department has been operating for years under a completely unrealistic set of fiscal assumptions. The result has been the accumulation, on the books, of a “deficit” of approximately $11 million that is still growing. That this is a “deficit” is based on the assumption, instituted as policy by President Mortimer, that the Athletics Department should generate enough income to pay all of its expenses. That assumption is unrealistic because athletics programs simply cost money. In recent years, fewer than two dozen schools nationwide have been able to match athletics expenditures with income. That number may increase in the near future, but only because large amounts of money have become available to university athletics programs from cable TV. We are not in a position to benefit from these new funds, nor are most of the public universities that we consider our peers. We actually do a better job of covering expenditures with athletically generated income than almost all of our real peers, even though our expenses for such things as travel are much higher than theirs because of our location; but like them, we still don’t generate enough. The precise size of that “deficit,” however, depends upon dozens of unexamined assumptions about which expenditures should be charged to Athletics and which should not. The university does in fact provide direct support to the Athletics Department already, support that does not always appear on its books, while at the same time the Department is required to carry costs that at other schools, and in other departments on our campus, are attributed somewhere else. As an English professor, the entire budget process often seems to me to be a sort of elaborate shell game. But perhaps what is most surprising to me is that this game has gone on for so long, so that the “deficit” is now too big to be ignored. One of the BOR Task Force’s charges to the chancellor is that he come up with a realistic budget for the athletics program. That will mean an honest assessment of what athletics really costs, now and in the future. It will also mean an honest assessment of how it will be paid for, based on realistic assumptions about prospects for revenue generation. It will probably require an honest admission that if the community demands that we continue to offer intercollegiate athletics, as it seems to do, then it will have to be prepared to help foot the bill, because it is too late to pretend that the costs are not real, and no one that I know – including the present Athletics Department administration – believes that the money to support athletics should be taken from the university’s academic or research programs.

That discussion is going to take place, however, at a time when intercollegiate athletics is rapidly changing in unpredictable ways, in large part due to the infusion of those large amounts of cash from cable TV. Football and Basketball have become enormously profitable, but the wealth is not shared equally, especially in Football. There is serious talk of separating Football from the NCAA; there is also talk of the major Football schools breaking away from the NCAA and forming their own national association. Either move would have the consequence of freeing the major Football programs from
the amateurism and academic regulations of the NCAA: they would be able to provide their Football players with benefits and even income that schools like ours would not be able to afford; and they wouldn’t even have to require that their Football players be full-time students. The best players would go to those schools, and schools like ours would suddenly become the new Division II. If we lost our fan base for Football, we would also lose a large part of the income that supports our other athletics programs. In other words, as athletics at some schools becomes more professionalized, at schools like ours athletics may very well have to shrink. Many would welcome the consequence; many would resist it. The only thing that I am sure of is that as we plan for the future, we need to recognize that a large part of it will be completely beyond our control.